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SUBJECT: SUBDUED REACTION TO IRF REPORT IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A) HANOI 2625; B) HCMC 1077

1. (SBU) Summary: Media coverage and official reaction in Southern Vietnam to the decision to designate Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) has been muted. While the HCMC press faithfully carried Hanoi-issued editorials on CPC, there was no "piling on," i.e., no effort to supplement with locally produced material. CPC coverage was relegated to the papers' inside pages while the visit of Washington State Governor Locke and the continuing Agent Orange campaign were front-page news. Similarly, despite numerous opportunities to focus on CPC in official meetings, reactions of our interlocutors were either extremely mild or nonexistent. End summary.

2. (SBU) Media coverage in HCMC of the IRF report and Vietnam's designation as a CPC has been subdued. Most HCMC papers have simply provided straight reporting of Vietnam News Agency press releases. (Note: VNA is directly controlled and operated by GVN and serves to release statements by government ministries and mass organizations. End note). To date, only one locally-produced editorial denouncing the CPC decision has appeared in any HCMC newspaper, and that came from the Cong An Daily (Police), a paper that serves as the mouthpiece for the Ministry of Public Security and which is known to generally level the harshest criticism at U.S. policy. While Hanoi papers have printed daily interviews with religious dignitaries defending Vietnam's religious policies (Ref A - Hanoi 2625), to date only one HCMC paper, Nguoi Lao Dong (Laborer), has carried a similar interview.

3. (SBU) In contrast to CPC, a trade mission led by Washington State Governor Gary Locke received broad, positive, front-page coverage in nearly all of the major dailies and prominent inside coverage by Saigon Giai Phong, the Communist Party's official paper in the South. The ongoing GVN-sponsored campaign on Agent Orange (Ref B - HCMC 1077) also eclipsed CPC here. In recent days all coverage of the CPC decision has virtually disappeared from HCMC papers.

4. (SBU) Subdued reaction to CPC was also the norm in ConGen's official meetings and private conversations. Typical was a meeting the day of the designation, when the only comment on CPC by a senior member of the Communist Party in HCMC to PolOff was that while the decision was regrettable, the bilateral relationship was still positive on many other fronts. He then shifted the discussion to internal party politics. Other officials have opted to avoid the topic altogether. In a meeting on September 22nd with the Director of the Department of Culture and Information, the CG provided numerous openings yet absolutely no mention of CPC was made. Similarly, as PAO met with various officials in the Mekong Delta last week, the subject was never broached. This is in stark contrast to the incessant 'demarches' PAS received at all official meetings in Danang following the House passage of the Vietnam Human Rights Act (HR 1587) in July.

5. (SBU) When our interlocutors sought to discuss CPC, their focus appeared to be more on damage limitation than on hectoring. One official at the HCMC External Relations Office told us that he feared that CPC would be exploited by hardliners in the GVN who want to obstruct further progress in bilateral ties. He sought guidance as to what the GVN could do to get its views on issues of religion out to the U.S. decision makers more effectively and how the GVN might avoid sanctions. He fretted that hardliners would particularly benefit were the U.S. to impose sanctions, as the GVN "would be forced to retaliate."

WINNICK